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Mime-Version: 1.0
Date: Mon, 22 Mar 1999 23:53:39 -0800
To: Harold_Varmus@nih.gov
From: "Patrick O. Brown" <pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu>
Subject: eprint brouhaha
Cc: lipman@ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

Hi Harold,

I hope you had a great trip to South Africa.

I'm eager to help you to forge ahead on the eprint project.

You may by now have heard that the the scientific publishers were scared shitless by the news that NIH might support an eprint system, and may now be looking for ways to oppose it.

This proves that we're doing something right! ... i.e., despite all their poo-pooing of eprints and their claims that scientists will never abandon the journals for an eprint system, they know that scientists will quickly adopt and greatly prefer the eprint mechanism, leaving them to wither and die.

I think it will be critical in facing the political opposition to distinguish between the publishers (even the ostensibly altruistic publishers of society journals) and the scientific community that they may purport to represent. We need to be completely candid and confrontational in arguing that the publishers' interests in self-preservation are in conflict with the interest of the scientific community and the public in improving scientific communication, and in relieving the extortionate financial burden imposed on the scientific community and on taxpayers by the current publication system.

An additional comment on your draft proposal: Mechanism 1, although it appears to offer a way to appease the conservatism of the societies, risks obstructing progress to a definitive eprint system. In the short term, it will encourage well-meaning scientific societies to invest their limited supply of time and effort in an obsolescent transitional version of the eprint system. And by offering to support this mechanism initially, NIH may encourage the wishful notion that there will be a commitment to provide long-term support to this mechanism as an alternative (rather than as a bridge) to mechanism 2. And if long-term entitlement to NIH support of an eprint reinvention of society journals becomes an expectation, we have a dangerous and politically treacherous situation. In addition, mechanism 1 deflects the focus, and competes for precious resources (the editorial staffs, the reviewers, the energy and staff of NCBI, the attention of the scientific community...) from the more open, fair, flexible, evolvable, mechanism 2.

I'm scheduled to talk to the PNAS editorial board on April 25 about the case for an eprint system. I'm going to stick as close to the NIH model of

the moment as I can. What I want to do is to put those who would argue against the eprint system in the position of having to defend the current system rather than the other way around. I'm now thinking that the best way to do this will be to ask them to imagine that the "mature" eprint system (which I will describe) is the status quo, and then imagine that someone were to propose that we replace it with something like the journal system as it now exists. It would be seen as the most absurd, ridiculous, retrograde proposal ever made. It follows that the barrier to adoption of the eprint system is kinetic rather than thermodynamic. And if that's true then they have the choice of either obstructing or facilitating the inevitable transition to a much better and more sensible system... Since this will be a very good group to have on our side, I'd really welcome your guidance on how I should handle this presentation.

Best regards,

Pat

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